In the middle of the 20th century, while many women of the western world were enjoying a certain degree of freedom compared with the majority of history, there was a dirty secret. The Magdalene Asylums in parts of Ireland, France, England, and even the United States were a place women feared. Controlled by the Catholic Church and managed by nuns, the Magdalene Asylums became a place to send “fallen women,” a term that became more loosely defined as time progressed. As the 19th century turned into the 20th more and more women were held in these asylums against their will and forced to clean the laundry of the townspeople as a symbolic representation of purging their souls of sin and contamination. In this essay I explore the history and evolution of the Magdalene asylums in Ireland during the 19th and 20th centuries and analyze the social and ideological forces that shaped their formation.
Imagine being forced to live in an institution where every act of every day is controlled by someone else. Where you work long hours for no pay throughout year, where you are forced to relentlessly repent “crimes” you may or may not have committed, where you have no friends, and where you are forced to turn your back on your entire past, while all the while paying for the mistakes you once made. Imagine existing outside of the law, where you are not given fair trial, but rather, forced to live a life of slavery. Imagine living when every day is the same as the one before it, and there is little hope of escaping.

Such was the reality for thousands of women during the 19th century all the way through the end of the 20th, who were stigmatized by society for deviating from the norms of Irish Catholic “morality,” particularly in terms of female sexuality. Rooted in English Victorian ideals, which emphasized moderation and the absolute denial of pleasure, the period from the mid-19th century through the mid-20th century was a time of extreme religious prudery in Ireland, where women were expected to be nothing more or less than wives and mothers: in that order. To redeem these “fallen women,” as they were often called, institutions known as Magdalene Laundries were set up all over Ireland and other parts of the western world, including England, France, and America. In these institutions, women worked to purify their souls by tirelessly and symbolically cleansing the dirty laundry of the townspeople. These Magdalene asylums (although they had existed earlier in European history) flourished during this period as a result of Victorian perceptions of sexuality and new Irish legislation limiting women’s rights in the years following Ireland’s separation from England in the early decades of the 20th-century. Most of the early asylums of the 19th century believed women should enter and exit the institutions voluntarily. As the 20th century drew nearer, however, more women were forced to live in the
asylums and held there against their wills as a result of extremely conservative cultural perceptions of female sexuality.

As a country that had been under the control of England for hundreds of years, Ireland was deeply affected by English culture. The Victorians saw sexuality as a dark and barbaric force that needed to be controlled and repressed in civilized societies. These Victorian ideals about sexuality paralleled Catholicism’s, making the philosophies of Victorian England appealing to Irish Catholic perceptions of morality. As Tom Inglis points out in his article “Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery,” the primary difference between English Victorian constraints on sexuality and Ireland’s interpretation of them was that Ireland hung on to these ideas long after England had discarded them. Inglis describes this phenomenon as the “long 19th century of Irish Catholicism,” which lasted from the early 19th century until the mid-20th century, and embedded itself deep within every facet of Irish culture. This movement made women the gatekeepers of morality. According to Inglis, “It was believed that by [their] very existence [women] offered a moral ideal to which men could aspire through the agency of love—to worship [women] was to renounce one’s sinfulness and to ascend to a purer way of life.” This cultural ideal of worship-worthy women was mirrored in the Catholic reverence of the Virgin Mary who is held in higher esteem within the Catholic Church than she is in English Protestantism. At this time, women who remained highly emotional, childlike, and, above all, virginal or sexually naïve, were the

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid. 14.
4 Ibid. 16.
model of perfection. Any woman who deviated from this “norm” was seen as a lesser woman, and was devalued in all sectors of society: family, church, and state.

In Ireland, the post-famine conditions of the mid-19th century only fueled the flame of prudery that had begun earlier in the century. The population of Ireland increased dramatically from 1754 to 1841, from about 2.2 to 8.2 million. Since sex was only acceptable after marriage, the Irish attempted to limit fertility by limiting the number of marriages taking place. Consequently, there were many young people who could not hope to be married, and by extension, have sex in a socially accepted way. This lead to an increase in control over sexuality, carried out by the Catholic Church and society as a whole by means of families. The social interaction between young men and women was strongly censured during this time because family honor rested on the pureness of women. In spite of parental supervision, however, the family was often blamed in Victorian-era rescue literature for allowing young women to fall prey to unnatural worldly temptations. This gave religious institutions such as Magdalene asylums (and the religious officials who ran them) the role of savior to these “fallen women” in place of family and society, who often failed.

The obsession with retaining sexual purity also stemmed from the desire of Catholics to assert their moral superiority over their Protestant English colonizers. Interestingly, at the same time that marriage was being limited, a movement that emphasized the naturalness of motherhood was taking place. Resulting from Victorian ideals about motherhood as the highest

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5 Smith, James M. *Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment.* 35.
level of achievement for women, the Irish perception of motherhood would come to affect women who strayed from the norm, many of whom would be put into Magdalene asylums to repent their “sins” over the course of the next century and a half.

The Magdalene asylums of the 19th century provided a place for women who had been shunned by society due to unrespectable womanly behavior. During this century, the majority of women who entered the Magdalene asylums were women whose livelihood was prostitution. Like the Magdalene asylums dating back to the thirteenth century, these more modern versions of the historical institutions used Mary Magdalene as their Patron Saint. According to Christian belief, Mary Magdalene had been a prostitute who had forsaken her “sinful” life in order to become a follower of Jesus Christ. In the minds of many religious people, she served as proof that female sexuality could and should be conquered.7

Women entering 19th century Magdalene asylums often did so voluntarily, although cleansing their souls was not usually their main priority. Women often chose to live in the asylums for lack of a better place to go. Many left the asylums and returned (some as many as ten times) which may serve as proof that these institutions were not very good at redeeming women and returning them back to society permanently.8 It is estimated that about 66% of women entered the asylums voluntarily during the 19th century.9 The rest were usually incarcerated by their families as a result of perceived sexual immorality, such as unmarried

8 Luddy, Maria. “Abandoned Women and Bad Characters: Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Ireland.” Women’s History Review. 497.
9 Ibid.
10 Smith, James M. Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment. 31.
motherhood, rape, incest, and sexual abuse, or by police, who used Magdalene asylums as an alternative to prison for crimes such as prostitution and concealment of birth.\textsuperscript{10}

The difference between the older versions of the Magdalene asylums and those of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century was that the newer asylums fit into a more modern and cohesive system of social control that was built upon interconnected institutions, such as orphanages, reformatories, workhouses, and mother and baby homes. These institutions were increasingly under the control of religious officials. Therefore, all corners of social life were influenced by unyielding religious beliefs regarding morality, frugality, and sexual restraint.\textsuperscript{11} During the post-famine years in Ireland, the parish priest became a very powerful person in the smaller sectors of Irish society. Often championing ideals of female modesty and separate spheres for men and women, the parish priests and the Catholic Church in general made the domestic sphere the center for the true Irish-Catholic-Nationalist family, and women were responsible for upholding this ideal, unyielding sphere\textsuperscript{12}

What was unique about the Magdalene asylums was that they existed outside of the law. They did not receive any per capita grants, and they relied on private donations and money they received through the laundry labor. The women at the asylums, commonly called “penitents” (whether or not they were truly penitent) were not paid for their work, which made the asylums a very profitable resource for the Church. Most importantly, however, was the fact that women could be placed in the asylums by family or church officials and kept there without


\textsuperscript{12} Smith, James M. \textit{Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment}. 26.
a fair trial. This would be a problem during the 20th century, when admittance and release was often far from voluntary.

During the 19th century, prostitution was considered to be a huge problem in Ireland, and as Maria Luddy argues in her essay “Abandoned Women and Bad Characters,” the biggest problem people found with prostitution at this time was its visibility. By the 1850s there was a direct attempt by society to separate the “bad women” from the innocent, impressionable “good women.” Magdalene Asylums became a place to hide women of an unrespectable nature.13 Most people did not think twice about condemning women who practiced prostitution, despite the limited employment opportunities offered to women at the time, particularly women of the lower classes which was where the majority of prostitutes were from.

Once women were sent to Magdalene asylums, they were separated from their fellow penitents based on the criteria of overall time spent at the institution and the degree of penitence displayed by them up to that point.14 In order to leave their previous life of sin behind, women were given a new name “to symbolize an obliteration of [their] former identity.”15 In the case of the Magdalene asylum that was run by The Sisters of Mercy, women were required to sacrifice their hair, just as Mary Magdalene is said to have done in the Bible. This tactic could also be used to keep women at the asylums, knowing they would stand out in society if they managed to escape. In the guidebook of The Sisters of Mercy they describe the significance of the sheering of the penitent’s hair:

As Magdalene began the evidence of her conversion by consecrating her hair to her Redeemer, so do they, and thus give reason to hope that they

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13 Luddy, Maria. “Abandoned Women and Bad Characters.” Women’s History Review. 493-493.
14 Ibid. 495.
15 Titley, Brian. “Heil Mary.” 5.
really intend to imitate her in her penance as they have done in her sins....some, who would not yield to better motives, have been known to defer leaving the Asylum until their hair should be sufficiently grown, in whom in the meantime grace grew and passion subsided, and they became good penitents.16

Just as hair was seen as a vanity, so were all other forms of adornment, which were forbidden. Women dressed in simple clothes suitable to the work that defined their new lives. To add to the drudgery of laundry labor, the penitents were not permitted to talk to one another. As the Sisters of Mercy guidebook claimed, “constant occupation [was] necessary for all,”17 and conversation and friendship were most certainly not ways of proving yourself as a serious penitent.

For women who were intent on truly repenting their former sins, there was a hierarchy within the Magdalene asylums that allowed a certain few to climb to more respectable positions. An article featured in the Irish Rosary, the Dominican Father’s monthly magazine, in 1897 discusses these hierarchies:

There are three classes—the ordinary penitents, the Children of Mary, and the consecrated. When a girl has gone through a term of probation, and given proof of sincere conversion, she is admitted into the Confraternity of the Children of Mary, and from this, after another term of probation, she is free to pass by five different stages into the ranks of the consecrated. The consecrated are supposed to remain for life, and engage themselves to do so by an act of consecration. They are distinguished from the rest by being dressed in black, with a white kerchief, and having silver cross suspended from their necks.18

In spite of these opportunities to climb the hierarchy, women who advanced within the system were not given their freedom. James Smith summarizes the situation when he writes,

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16 Luddy, Maria. “Abandoned Women and Bad Characters.” Women’s History Review. 496.
17 Ibid.
18 Smith, James M. Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment. 39-40.
“The internal hierarchy duplicates a recognizable power structure within the community of marginalized women but attaches no tangible rewards to achievement . . . the women were never any closer to realizing their freedom; indeed, becoming a ‘consecrated’ Magdalene required taking a vow to remain in the asylum for life.”¹⁹ The penitents were still infantilized and controlled by the nuns, and their advancement within the system was dependent upon the nun’s favorable opinions.

There was a stark contrast between the penitent women and the nuns who acted as their “mothers.” Even though certain penitents could climb the hierarchy, they were never given the respect or status given to the nuns. Visitors to the asylums, such as the Dominican friar who wrote the article for the Irish Rosary, who were able to see the asylums so closely, were often struck by the idea of having such “innocence” juxtaposed with such “sinfulness.” He also describes this in his article when he writes:

Innocence and guilt face to face! The bright cheerfulness of unsullied virtue so near to the most abject wretchedness of multiplied sinfulness!
The spotless lily side by side with the rank, noxious, foul-smelling weed that grew up in the dark shadows of the crumbling tomb!²⁰

The pure shock expressed in this quote further illustrates this contradiction between the social ideal, the chaste motherly nun, and the social outcast—the penitent woman. The penitent woman is a disgusting, threatening weed and the nun a pure, natural flower.

As the 19th century came to an end, the number of prostitutes in Ireland was drastically decreasing. This started to limit the number of women who were being forced into Magdalene asylums and posed a threat to the previously profitable laundries. In order for the Magdalene

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¹⁹ Ibid. 40
²⁰ Ibid. 35
asylums to continue their mission and remain a profitable asset to Catholic Church, they needed to continue admitting women to their institutions. It was this drop in prostitution that lead to a broader definition of who should be sent to Magdalene asylums in the 20th century. Since there were fewer prostitutes in need of rescuing, the asylums had to turn their attention to other sexual deviants: unmarried mothers, rape victims, sexually active singletons, adulterers, and women who were predisposed to sin due their above average attractiveness or delicacy of mind.\footnote{Luddy, Maria. “Abandoned Women and Bad Characters.” 499.} In contrast to the records available in reference to the Magdalene asylums of the 19th century, the religious congregations that operated these laundries in the 20th century have withheld the official records for the asylums after the year 1900. Consequently, the majority of information about the conditions of those institutions has been acquired through personal accounts.\footnote{Smith, James M. Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment. 24.}

Despite the new century, conditions for women worsened in Ireland. After Ireland’s separation from England in 1922, more and more legislation was passed to limit the rights of women, rather than increase their rights.\footnote{Ibid. 48.} The primary change between the Magdalene asylums of the 19th century and those of the 20th was the relationship between the new Irish Free State and the Catholic Church. For many government officials, it was inconceivable to challenge the Catholic Church, because the relationship between the state and the Catholic Church was what was tying the young, fragile nation-state together\footnote{Ibid. 47.}. The government used propaganda at this time to portray women as emotional, sensitive, irrational beings who were childlike and in need of male protection. They were portrayed as helpless and unable to make informed decisions: the
complete opposite of their capable husbands, fathers, and brothers. The Irish Free State used similar tactics to devalue women that had been used against Ireland as a whole to devalue its people while it was under the control of England.25

In the early years of the 20th century more women had begun working outside of the home, although not nearly to the extent they had in other European countries. There was an increase in sermons regarding the “moral decay” of Ireland’s women who were daring to work outside of the domestic sphere, which was still viewed not only their responsibility but their God-given place.26 After Ireland’s independence was won, the number of women choosing to become nuns increased dramatically, reaching its peak during the mid-1960s.27 In the same way that lay women were devalued for their work, nuns were valued for it. Taking on the role of nun allowed many women during this time to avoid the roles of wife and mother, while still maintaining positions of status and respect.28

In her study of women who chose to become nuns between 1931 and 1965, Yvonne McKenna found that many of the women she interviewed wanted to avoid the traditional path of marriage and motherhood, but could not do so in any other socially acceptable way. One of the women, Geraldine, said she had “a sense that being married and with children was going to interfere with the plans [she] had for [herself].”29 Likewise, another nun named Catherine said she “felt that if [she] wanted to go and look after all these babies and children, and wanted to

26 Ibid. 121.
28 Ibid. 41.
29 Ibid. 47.
travel and do all these different things, that if [she] was married and had children of [her] own, that was the end of it.”³⁰ These interviews show how limited the options were for women who did not want to become wives and mothers. Since spinsters were highly devalued by Irish society at the time, women who were determined to be respected in roles outside of the domestic sphere had no choice but to become nuns.

Peter Mullen’s 2002 film, *The Magdalene Sisters*, is a modern interpretation of the Magdalene Laundries of the mid-20th century. Beginning in 1964, *The Magdalene Sisters* tells the story of four women who are forcibly sent to an asylum for various reasons surrounding female sexuality. Reactions to the film were mixed. On the one hand, it received praise when it was given the Gold Lion award at the Venice International Film Festival and on the other it was described as “an angry and rancorous provocation” by *L’ Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican Newspaper.³¹ The Catholic Church does not seem to be able to take responsibility for its actions and is in no hurry to reveal official records from the 20th century Magdalene asylums. After the film’s release, people were shocked that such injustice was going on during the 20th century in Western Europe, especially during the 1960s, which is commonly recognized as a period of semi-liberation for women in the western world. Released at the time when a variety of clerical sex scandals swept both Ireland and the United States, it was impossible for moviegoers to view the film independently from that media filter.³² This film is an invaluable resource because it portrays an injustice that many people weren’t even aware of before the film’s release in 2002.

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³⁰ Ibid.
³¹ Smith, James M. *Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries*. 139.
³² Ibid.
Mullen wrote and directed the film, taking the experiences of his four main characters from four case studies of women who had not been at the same laundries at the same time. The four main characters are sent to the asylum for various reasons. Margaret, the first character to be introduced, is sent to the asylum because she was raped by her cousin. Patricia has just had a baby out of wedlock and is forced to give up the baby and begin her life at the asylum. Bernadette, who is very pretty, is seen talking to some boys during recess at her school. She is deemed likely to fall, and sent away immediately. Crispina, a mentally unstable, unmarried mother is the last of the four. The film’s portrayal of their experiences focuses on the trifecta of sexual control over Irish women during this period: the family, the state, and the church.\textsuperscript{33}

The opening scene takes place at a wedding and shows the role the family played in upholding women’s prescribed morality. It introduces the main character Margaret. After she has been raped by her cousin in an upstairs room during the reception she returns downstairs where she tells a female cousin what happened. Once the news reaches the men of the family and the priest (who is ironically singing an Irish folk song about incest) they look at her with distain and whisper amongst themselves, deciding her fate. The song in the background is about a woman who has had six children, two each by her father, brother, and uncle.\textsuperscript{34} The conclusion of the song talks about how she will only be delivered if she passively endures her fate. Margaret’s family fears that if people find out about her rape, the whole family’s reputation will be ruined. Margaret is seen as the sexual deviant, while her cousin is not punished at all for his actions or viewed as a deviant in any way. The film condemns this

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid. 142.
Patriarchal society. The theme of men getting away with sexual deviation while women pay for it recurs.

In the film, Mullen also criticizes the state and its involvement in allowing the asylums to stay open. In one scene, when the penitents are forming a procession through town on their way to a special outdoor Corpus Christi service, they are flanked on either side by police. Mullen based this scene on a photograph of women from the Gloucester Street asylum on their way to a Corpus Christi service, who were also being closely watched by police.35 In his chapter about the film in his book *Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment*, James Smith asks the rhetorical question, “If, as the state maintains, the Magdalene asylums were private religious institutions outside political control, why were the nation’s police used to enforce a form of imprisonment inconsistent with the judicial and constitutional rights afforded all Irish citizens?”36 It is natural to wonder why and how the same government that denied fair trials to so many women and maintained its disconnectedness with the asylums was present to force the penitents into passive submission on occasions such as this.

The final and most apparent villain in this film is the Catholic Church itself, specifically manifested in the nuns. The nuns were portrayed as sadistic, unsympathetic women who made the lives of the penitents in their “care” no less than a living hell. Sister Bridget, the convent’s mother superior, is a woman viewers love to hate. Sister Bridget is routinely shown counting the money the asylum makes and hording it away from the women who slave in the laundries. When Bernadette fails to escape, she is outnumbered and held down by the nuns. They cut her hair violently, causing her to bleed profusely from the scalp. Mullen was criticized for

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35 Ibid. 146.
36 Ibid.
portraying the nuns in such a stereotypical manner, because viewers tend to see the nuns as the primary agents who imprisoned these women, when in reality, there were a variety of cultural influences that enabled and justified that kind of treatment.\textsuperscript{37} The nuns were not the only members of the church that Mullen criticized in the film, however. In the film, the parish priest of the asylum has a sexual relationship with Crispina, whose mental instability makes her especially vulnerable. Mullen criticizes this Patriarchal society that at worst condones and at best ignores male sexuality and hypocrisy while at the same time condemning female sexuality.

In conclusion, there were social factors that contributed to the increase in Magdalene asylums throughout the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, including the Irish application of Victorian ideals about sexuality during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and new legislation limiting the rights of women during the 1920s and 30s. As the 19\textsuperscript{th} century progressed, prostitution decreased and the asylums needed to find other women to work in the laundries. This led to an increase in the variety of women admitted to the asylums during the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. While the Church has been widely accused for the pain it has caused, it is not the only group of people responsible for these humiliating and corrupt institutions. The state and the family acted as accomplices in the degradation of women and the devaluation of female sexuality and self-expression.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. 150.
References


